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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/C AND DRL

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TAGS: CM PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: CAMEROON: SDF CHAIRMAN THREATENS TO DISRUPT 2011 ELECTIONS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 3, Chairman of the leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), John Fru Ndi met with Ambassador as part of a broad outreach to resident Chiefs of Mission about the current political situation. He and several SDF colleagues bemoaned the lack of democracy in Cameroon and said they are convinced President Biya will run again in 2011. If he wins, the SDF fears a violent backlash that they will not be able to control. End summary.

¶2. (C) Fru Ndi thanked Ambassador for the USG's critical position toward the recently created Elections Cameroon (ELECAM). Accompanied by other senior SDF officials, he praised the Embassy for talking to all elements of Cameroonian society and affirmed that foreigners cannot want change in Cameroon more than Cameroilians themselves do.

¶3. (C) Fru Ndi decried the current state of democracy. Parliamentarians have little voice and ruling CPDM party Members of Parliament feel bound by party discipline, he said. He expounded on previous government attempts to rig elections, stating that in 1992 (when many international and domestic observers thought Fru Ndi won presidential elections) he had to calm anger within his party "to avoid war". He pointed to low voter turnout, reflecting high levels of cynicism about elections, and the co-optation or corruption of civil society. Fru Ndi said President Biya has been unwilling to meet with him and is increasingly out of touch.

¶4. (C) There is no doubt that Biya is preparing to run again in 2011, according to SDF Vice President Josh Osih, who pointed to recent decisions to amend the constitution and pack ELECAM with senior party insiders. He thought Biya would be fine with low voter turnout in 2011 and that his biggest fear is being tried for crimes against humanity if he leaves office. Osih said that if Biya wins again the SDF would not be able to control a public which has lost hope of peaceful transition. There is already significant pressure for violent protest, he said. Fru Ndi inserted that "anarchy is possible" if Biya wins the next election.

¶5. (C) Osih clarified that the SDF is not planning to boycott the 2011 election but he stated that it was currently "impossible" to hold free and fair elections and if the current situation remains, the party "will do everything to ensure elections don't take place." While Fru Ndi focused on the need for a credible voter registration process, Osih saw as higher priorities passing of a new electoral law, releasing the long-awaited census, and creating a more balanced ELECAM membership.

¶6. (C) Comment: This was Fru Ndi's first visit to the Embassy in over a year and other diplomatic counterparts confirmed he has been meeting with a wide cross-section of Ambassadors over the past week. He appears to want to boost

his standing in the international community, noting that the SDF has greater parliamentary representation than other opposition parties and expressing interest in Washington meetings at some point down the road. Fru Ndi is seen as a fading force even within his own party. This was reinforced to us in this meeting by his heavy focus on past grievances and his inability to articulate the SDF approach to 2011. He did not ask us for anything in particular. Osih talked about a new generation of more frustrated politicians (he is one) and spoke more openly than in past meetings about potential future violence and about the risks he and opposition colleagues are willing to contemplate as their hopes for the future fade. It is hard to assess how much of the SDF talk of violence is real and how much is bluster; most leaders of other opposition parties are unlikely to join in civic action organized by a Fru Ndi-led SDF. However, as demonstrated in the February 2008 riots, high frustration levels in Cameroon bear close watching.

GARVEY